

## How We Grow: Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines

### Week 1 - Prayer

March 17, 2024

#### I. Teaching Time (*Teaching Video provided*)

A. Teaching Narrative: We have been created for connection. Because God is love and because we have been created in the image of the God of love, we've been made for love. Each one of us has been intentionally crafted with a number of different means through which we can love our God and love one another. We have been created to think logically, feel deeply, listen intentionally, remember faithfully, experience bodily, and dream imaginatively in order that we might know God more fully and become more and more like Jesus. That's where spiritual disciplines come in! Richard Foster writes that spiritual disciplines are intentional practices that give us space to "place ourselves before God, so that he can transform us."<sup>1</sup> Curt Thompson writes that they "create space within us for God to work."<sup>2</sup> More than anything, these disciplines open us up to God's empowering presence. They empower us to love and to release that which prevents us from loving. As we engage with our God through these practices, we are being transformed more fully into the image of God. This is the goal of our spiritual formation—Christlikeness—and as we are being formed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit seeks to engage our whole self: mind, body, and will. Over these next nine weeks, we are excited to both learn about and practice together nine sets of spiritual disciplines. We are eager to see what happens as we create space as a church family for God to work through these disciplines.

This week, we are focusing on the spiritual discipline of prayer. Foster writes that prayer is "the most central [discipline] because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father."<sup>3</sup> Ruth Haley Barton writes, "The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God."<sup>4</sup> Simply put, prayer is all about how we communicate

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Colorado Springs: Tyndall Momentum 2010), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 63.

with God. Prayer is the root of many of the spiritual disciplines we will be studying and practicing during this series. But prayer is learned. In Luke 11:1, one of his disciples says to Jesus, “Lord teach us to pray.” And if the goal of these spiritual disciplines is that we become more like Jesus, it makes sense for us to look to Jesus to learn how to pray. First, Jesus made prayer a habit. Throughout his life and ministry, we find Jesus going out *early in the morning to lonely places* to pray (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46–47; Luke 6:12; John 6:15). He also encouraged his followers to have a sacred, private place to pray (Matthew 6:6). By setting aside a place and a time to pray, we can help make prayer a regular part of our daily routine. So what might it look like for you to have a certain place that is set aside as a place of prayer? Perhaps a certain chair in your home or on your back porch? Or maybe a trail or walkway near your home? And also do you have a time (for yourself or for your family) that you’ve set aside to pray? Setting aside a time and a place can help make prayer a habit and can help invite the Lord into our everyday.

Jesus also prayed along the way. He models prayer without ceasing. While Jesus was going about his day-to-day ministry, he looked to the Father and relied on the Spirit. Before feeding the 5000, Jesus looks to the heavens and gives thanks just as he does throughout many of his miracles (Mt. 14:19). He listens to the Spirit who leads him to Samaria to meet the woman at the well (John 4:4). And in one of the most poignant moments in all of the Gospels, as Jesus sees his dead friend, Lazarus, we read, “And Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’” Jesus models what it looks like for us to regularly invite the Lord into our day-to-day life and ministry. So what might it look like for you to do the same? What does praying without ceasing look like in your context?

Finally, Jesus teaches us to pray authentically. We ought to pray to a God who already knows us and sees us as we are. Jesus teaches his apostles in Matthew 6:7–8, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” If one of the goals of prayer is intimacy with God, we can trust God to be our wholehearted selves. We can entrust him with our darkest fears, deepest struggles, and greatest joys.

B. Here’s an initial question to discuss as a class: What are some models of prayer that have been helpful for you throughout the years?

## II. Discussion Time (Questions Provided by Jason)

A. What is your experience with the spiritual disciplines? Have you ever studied them? Of these nine spiritual disciplines we’ll discuss in this series (prayer, fasting, generosity,

meditation, confession, solitude / silence, study, service and rest), which ones do you practice on a regular basis?

- B. In the sermon, Jason read this quote from William Gurnall: “The saint’s sleeping time is Satan’s tempting time.” What do you make of this quote? In your opinion, how do these spiritual disciplines keep us “awake” to God?
  - C. When and where do you practice prayer? Do you have a set time (or times) in your schedule? Do you have a favorite place you like to pray? Take a few minutes to talk about your prayer life.
  - D. Many Christians confess to feeling that their prayer life is inadequate. Can you relate to that? In your opinion, why is this such a common feeling for many believers?
  - E. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase Jason used in his sermon: prayer as “keeping company with God”? Do you find that this phrase eases some of your anxiety about prayer?
  - F. What does Mark 1:32-37 teach us about the prayer life of Jesus? Is there an example here for us to follow?
  - G. Read Matthew 6:5-13. In this teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, what stands out to you?
  - H. Jason offered three suggestions for when you find yourself in a prayer “rut”: try different prayer methods (breath prayer, centering prayer, silent prayer); try different prayer postures (kneel; arms raised; go on a prayer walk); and try praying the words of Scripture (praying the Psalms). Are you familiar with these prayer methods / postures? What practical advice would you give to someone whose prayer life seems to be stuck?
  - I. Read Daniel 6:10-11. What stands out to you about the prayer life of Daniel?
  - J. Close with some prayer time, asking the Lord for the grace of being able to keep company with Him in prayer.
- III. Invitations of the Week: Choose at least one of these prayer practices and walk through them throughout the week. Be intentional about choosing a place and a time to pray. Also, at least one time this week, practice one of these guided prayers in the context of a community (with your spouse, family, roommates, small group, or group of friends).
- A. Praying the Lord’s Prayer (**Guided Prayer Video provided**)
    1. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Let’s take a moment to share with God those things (character traits, attributes) that you adore about God. Thank God for those attributes and actions.
    2. “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” What are some ways in which you can partner with God for his mission. At school? At the ball park? With your family? At dance class? Pray about those opportunities.

3. *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* Spend some time thinking and praying about those things that we need and those things that the people closest to us need.
4. *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* Let’s spend some time in confession, as well as thinking of those who we may not have forgiven in our lives.
5. *“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”* Spend some time thinking about the ways that Satan tries to tempt you at school and at home, and pray that God will keep you away from those temptations. Pray that you can get through them!
6. *“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”* Finally, close by remembering the ways that you have seen God’s kingdom and power at work in your life throughout the day. Try to be specific. Thank him for those moments.

B. Praying the Psalms (***Invitation Video provided***)

1. The Psalms can be an excellent way to enrich our prayers lives and in many ways is like a prayer book. During your prayer time this week, choose a psalm to pray through. Allow the psalmist’s words to become your own.<sup>5</sup>
  - a) To begin your day with God: Psalm 5, 19, 20, 23, 25
  - b) When you are sad: Psalm 13, 22, 42, 77
  - c) When you are in distress: Psalm 57, 60, 6
  - d) When you are scared: Psalm 27
  - e) When you are hurt: Psalm 10
  - f) When you ache for more of God: Psalm 63, 84
  - g) When you want to repent: Psalm 51
  - h) When you are grateful: Psalm 9, 103
  - i) When you want to worship: Psalm 8, 148-150

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<sup>5</sup>List adapted from John Mark Comer’s Prayer Guide (<https://www.practictheway.org/companion-guides>).